G-15 Countries Meet in Caracas

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Representatives of the nineteen countries that make up the Group of Fifteen (G-15) met in Caracas during the final weekend of February as opponents of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez clashed with National Guard troops on the streets outside the summit. Opposition groups sought to draw attention to their fight to hold a vote to have Chavez recalled.

A summit of the G-15 scheduled for last year in Caracas had to be cancelled because of security concerns and unrest there. Street violence over recall drive While opposition marches came together and fought with the militarized police of the Venezuelan National Guard some miles from the hotel where the summit was being held, Chavez rallied tens of thousands of his supporters in other parts of the city.

The now-familiar street contest to show popular resistance and popular support for Chavez (see NotiSur, 2002-11-22, 2002-10-18) became all the more heated because the G-15 summit coincided with the buildup to the announcement by the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) on whether the opposition had collected enough signatures to hold a recall vote against the president (see NotiSur, 2003-12-12). Chavez insisted that many of the more than three million signatures were fraudulent, while opponents demanded that the CNE certify their petitions.

As the summit progressed, indications increased that the CNE would regard more than a million of those signatures as invalid and would therefore rule that there were too few signatures to require a recall vote. This in turn led to intensified protests and anger among Chavez's opponents. Concerns about street violence marked the press coverage leading up to the summit, with both foreign delegations and Venezuelan officials expressing their worries in public.

Deputy William Lara denounced the opposition and claimed "intelligence sources" had found that assassins dressed as Chavez supporters planned to attack marching demonstrators to cause injuries and death and thereby reinforce the opposition's case. "They have decided to use firearms," he said. "The plan is to infiltrate their own march with people wearing the distinctive symbols of the parties that support the government."

Confrontations left at least one person dead and two injured on March 2, while a cameraman from Univision and a photographer from Agence France-Presse suffered bullet wounds. Guards fired tear gas and charged opposition demonstrators on Feb. 27, leaving at least six injured, with one guard member wounded by gunfire, according to a National Guard colonel who refused to be identified.

In that march, dozens of protestors broke off from the crowd and threw rocks at the military police while others set trash and tires ablaze and blocked a Caracas highway, according to Associated Press reports. Such melees would mark the whole weekend and would continue in the days after summit attendees had gone.
Struggling for relevance

The G-15 was first founded in 1989 and brings together nineteen countries: Algeria, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Jamaica, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Peru, Senegal, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe. Venezuela has held the presidency of the G-15 since 2001. The group's influence has waned since its founding, and part of the goal of this summit was to rebuild that influence. The G-15 arose from the initial desire of fifteen developing countries to create a regular consultative forum in which they could increase cooperation among them.

Along with Chavez, presidents like Alvaro Uribe of Colombia, Nestor Kirchner of Argentina, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil, Mohammad Khatami of Iran, and Jamaica's Prime Minister Percival Patterson were in attendance, while Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe was one of the first to arrive.

Other countries sent high-level officials to head their delegations. Some commentators said the small showing of presidents at the summit less than half of the constituent nations sent their chief executives, and only Chavez and Mugabe stayed more than 24 hours spoke poorly for the group's re-emergence as a world power. Mugabe and Chavez signed a pact to share energy technology and develop mining in the African nation. Chavez also called Mugabe a "freedom fighter," bestowing the visiting leader with a replica of South American independence hero Simon Bolivar's sword.

Zimbabwe is caught in its worst political and economic crisis since independence from Britain in 1980. Integration and renewal of MERCOSUR sought A meeting between the presidents of Venezuela, Argentina, and Brazil marked a trend toward regional integration in South America and the building of ties between poor countries, which may partially contradict statements that the G-15 is losing relevance.

The three "friends" reportedly reaffirmed their strong will to "drive and accelerate South American integration" in their private meeting. The executives agreed on the necessity of broadening the Southern Cone Common Market, or MERCOSUR, which brings together Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay and has Chile and Bolivia as associate members.

Venezuela, which, along with Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, is one of the principal members of the Comunidad Andina de Naciones (CAN), hopes to sign a trade accord with MERCOSUR, the first step in forming a large regional bloc. The three presidents also thought other mechanisms should come into play to strengthen regional integration. This trend matches other moves by poorer nations, including Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina, to form alternative groups to the G-8 (eight wealthy, industrialized nations) to express their economic concerns on the global stage (see NotiCen, 2004-02-26).

Some criticism of neoliberal models A draft declaration circulated at the summit's start contained central themes for the meeting like fighting poverty with oil wealth, dismantling industrialized nations' protectionist trade barriers, and reducing foreign debt. Some representatives attending
the summit had harsh words for the neoliberal economic model that they say has harmed Latin American countries in the past several years.

Chavez said that globalization has "accentuated the dependency" of emerging countries relative to developed nations and increased regional poverty. "Globalization has not brought a supposed interdependency, but rather an accentuation of dependency; far from globalizing wealth, poverty has been expanded." He claimed the "abyss" between the North and the South had been made "gigantic."

Nestor Kirchner made similar statements at recent appearances as well.

Mexican Secretary of Energy Felipe Calderon Hinojosa, who headed his country's delegation to the summit, advocated thinking of self-determination and democracy as associated values. "Precisely what makes the people's self-determination more solid is democracy," said Calderon in an interview with Mexican news agency Notimex. "What makes sovereignty most vulnerable is autocracy and authoritarianism....I believe it's valid for me to refer to this theme because it's inevitable, given the worrisome and tense situation that Venezuela is living in this moment. It seems to me that an important part of the development of our peoples has to do with the quality of democratic life."

Calderon's rhetoric, much less confrontational than Chavez's, seemed in part to match the tone of Iranian President Khatami, who called for North-South cooperation. "We need to maintain interaction with Western countries," he said, emphasizing his commitment to strengthening understanding with developed, industrialized countries, including those of the G-8.

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